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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 KATHMANDU 001262

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SUBJECT: REPORT ON TRAVEL FROM CENTRAL NEPAL

Classified By: DCM ROBERT BOGGS FOR REASONS 1.5 (B, D)

1. (C) Summary. On June 23-25, PolOff visited Bharatpur, headquarters of Chitwan district in Nepal's central lowlands, and Dhadingbesi, headquarters of Dhading district in the central hills. Officials in both districts reported that Maoist activity, including extortion and training, continues. Neither district has experienced clashes between the Maoists and security forces since the cease-fire was declared in January 2003. Nine Village Development Committee (VDC) areas in Chitwan and thirty VDCs in Dhading are considered Maoist-affected, with most government buildings and many telephone towers destroyed. However, since the cease-fire, government administration officials and most political party leaders have been able to work in even the most remote areas. District officials also reported that active Maoist cadres have returned to their home areas to visit their families, but stay for only a day or two before returning to their post. There is no indication that Maoist cadre are reintegrating with the communities in either district. End Summary.

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Chitwan District  
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2. (U) Predominately flat jungle land in southern Nepal, Chitwan is home to the Chitwan National Park, a popular tourist destination. With a population of roughly 400,000 people, the district is comprised of 36 Village Development Committee (VDC) areas, only nine of which are in Nepal's hill region, and two municipalities (Bharatpur and Birendranagar). Even the most remote VDC area is not more than one day's walk from Bharatpur, the district headquarters. (Note: Before local officials' terms lapsed in July 2002, Village Development Committees were led by an elected Chairman and Vice Chairman responsible for daily administration and development project implementation within their VDC area. Now, however, each VDC Area is being administered by the VDC Secretary, a civil servant. On June 30, Prime Minister Thapa

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extended the VDC Secretaries' mandate for an additional year. End Note.)

--- Maoist Activity ---

3. (C) Chitwan's acting Chief District Officer (ACDO) Lok Bahadur Khatri reported that the Maoists are most active in the nine hilly VDC areas, mainly in training and extorting money from local villagers and Nepalese involved in local development projects. Maoists also regularly harass government vehicles traveling through the hill areas, demanding payment for passage. There were two cases of Maoists stealing motorbikes from government workers. More seriously, Chitwan's Superintendent of Police Pratap Singh Thapa reported hearing that the Maoists have recruited several local villagers, but he was not sure if the people were abducted forcefully or if they left voluntarily. Superintendent Thapa said he could not file formal cases of abduction because of lack of evidence. Villagers are too afraid to provide evidence against the Maoists, he said.

4. (C) In the hill areas where they are most active, the Maoists typically stay in local villagers' homes for one night, moving on to a different village for the following night, ACDO Khatri said. As a security precaution, he reported, the insurgents do not take food from the same house in which they stay. Khatri also claimed that Maoists, whose families live in Chitwan, have returned for short visits (1-2 days) during the cease-fire, but are not reintegrating with their home communities. Superintendent Thapa reported that Maoist leaders Prachanda and Badal had returned twice to their homes in Chitwan since the cease-fire took hold.

5. (C) Superintendent Thapa also indicated that Maoist activists hold regular demonstrations and cycle rallies in the streets of Bharatpur and in villages. But the demonstrations last no more than 10 minutes, he said, and are typically over by the time the police arrive. Thapa said that Maoists also held a mass meeting outside Bharatpur in April to discuss their demands for a constituent assembly, but attendance was low. Through reports from the meeting, Thapa heard the Maoists claim that "they will not return to

the jungle" and that "the current cease-fire must be successful." Thapa suspected that the Maoists and local political party leaders have met secretly two or three times since the cease-fire and cooperate informally on an ongoing basis. At the student level, the Maoists and the five agitating political parties conduct joint protests, Thapa said.

16. (C) Thapa indicated that the Maoists in Chitwan appear to be taking this cease-fire more seriously by operating more openly than they did in the last cease-fire. On the other hand, Thapa later claimed that most of the Maoist cadres remain underground, but estimated that perhaps 100 militants were operating in the district with many more non-militant Maoists also active in the district. Thapa also said that Maoist supporters (not active members) have been much less vocal in their support of the Maoist cause during this cease-fire compared with the first cease-fire.

---- Security Forces and Local Administration ----

17. (C) Neither the police nor the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) have a permanent presence in the nine hilly VDC areas, said Khatri. Superintendent Thapa reported that there are 400 police officers at 15 posts in the district with 160 officers in the two municipalities and the remaining 240 officers at VDC-level posts. Thapa explained that there is roughly one police post for every 4 VDC areas, not including the hill areas where there is no presence. Thapa said, however, that the police have conducted patrols in the Maoist-affected areas since the cease-fire without incident. The police have conducted only two joint patrols with the RNA in Chitwan since the cease-fire. Two RNA battalions are present in Chitwan, one in Bharatpur and one within the Chitwan National Park.

18. (C) Despite the lack of security forces, most Nepalese are able to travel freely throughout the Maoist-affected areas, which is a significant departure from before the cease-fire.

On June 11, district administration officials and National Police and RNA officers provided social services, such as road building and medical treatment, without incident. (Note. The RNA and Police have been carrying out social welfare programs throughout the 75 Districts in Nepal. Some have resulted in clashes with the Maoists. End Note.) Moreover, according to Khatri, all 36 VDC Secretaries are present in the VDCs, although the nine Secretaries in the hill areas return to Bharatpur at night. All VDCs have received the federal government's allotment of 250,000 rupees for development projects, he said. ACDO Khatri explained that Chitwan's good road network keeps the Maoists confined to the more remote, hill areas of the district.

---- Political Parties ----

19. (C) There are three active political parties in Chitwan: Nepali Congress (NC), United-Marxist Leninist (UML) and People's Front Nepal (PFN). In the last elected government, UML held 25 and NC held 11 of the 36 VDC Chairmanship positions. However, the four national level constituencies were all won by Nepali Congress. Nepali Congress District President Krishna Lal Sapkota claimed that the UML held a local-level majority only because of UML ballot rigging at the 1997 elections.

110. (C) NC President Sapkota reported that the three political parties present in Chitwan are conducting regular protests at the district level based on the national agitation program. In addition, the party-affiliated student unions are very active in Chitwan district and have been participating in the national school lockout program. He said that Chitwan's Nepali Congress chapter has fully supported the ongoing student strike. Sapkota indicated that party leaders in Chitwan are not able to travel to the remote hill areas of the district due to fear of Maoist reprisals. Sapkota cited an armed Maoist gathering held June 23 in one of the hilly VDC areas: a dangerous situation for Nepali Congress leaders, he said.

111. (C) Sapkota claimed that government administration at the district level was not running effectively, in part because of political party agitation within the district. He complained of corruption within the current administration at the VDC level, particularly in the selling of passports and citizenship cards.

112. (C) United Marxist Leninist (UML) District Secretary Hari Sapkota claimed the cease-fire was going very well in Chitwan. Contrary to the Nepali Congress report, the UML Secretary suggested that UML party members could travel

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freely throughout Chitwan district and had no fear at night of Maoist reprisals. Seemingly more sympathetic to the Maoists, UML Secretary Sapkota claimed that the insurgents were not extorting money from businesses or villagers in

Chitwan. UML's support for the student union protests, he said, was not strong in Chitwan, although 50 schools in Chitwan have been closed on a trial basis. He suggested that the student unions, except for the Maoist-wing ANNISU-R, were not as active in Chitwan as other districts.

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Dhading District  
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13. (C) In Dhadingbesi, district headquarters for Dhading District, Poloff met with Chief District Officer Jeevan Prasad Woli, Inspector of Police Gopi Man Shrestha and leaders of all four active political parties: Nepali Congress, RPP, UML and People's Front Nepal. Dhading has a population of 338,513 people within 50 VDC areas, 30 of which are Maoist-affected. All VDC administration and police buildings, telephone towers and local phone booths in the 30 Maoist-affected VDC areas were destroyed prior to the cease-fire and have not been rebuilt. Poloff later drove by an Agriculture Development Office in Simile VDC area located just off the main highway 30 kilometers outside the Kathmandu Valley that the Maoists had destroyed by fire.

---- Maoist Activity ----

14. (C) The CDO and Inspector of Police both described northern Dhading district as a primary training ground for newly recruited Maoist cadre. Other ongoing Maoist activity in Dhading includes recruitment and extortion. The Maoists reportedly demand from 500 to 2000 rupees (USD 6.70 to 26.70) from villagers and local businesses, forcing them to accept receipts and Maoist 'membership cards' in return. Maoists also require all development programs, most of which are funded by the central government, to pay a 5-10 percent commission of the total cost of the program. Only a small handful of international NGOs operate in Dhading, including the Red Cross and the NGO Federation (International Labor Organization, Save the Children and the Asia Foundation) working mainly on women and children issues, particularly trafficking in persons. Inspector Shrestha had no reports of Maoists threatening these organizations.

15. (C) Since the cease-fire took hold, CDO Woli reported, Maoists whose homes are in Dhading have returned for short visits with their families, but stay for only one or two days. There is no indication that Maoists are reintegrating with local communities in Dhading. Maoists have held two large mass meetings in the district, one in Khahare in late April and the second in the district headquarters of Dhadingbesi in late May. Approximately 200-300 people attended both meetings, but most were forced to attend, according to Inspector Shrestha. The joint local government, police and RNA program to provide social services on June 11 went without incident, CDO Woli said.

---- Security Forces and Local Administration ----

16. (C) There are 250 Civilian Police officers and 200 RNA soldiers in Dhading district. During the last state of emergency, the district's 26 police posts were consolidated into only 3 posts in three of the main towns: Dhadingbesi, Kanekhola and Ghajuri. Police and RNA units conduct regular and ongoing patrols throughout the district, Inspector Shrestha said. However, no clashes between security forces and the Maoists have occurred in Dhading since the cease-fire, he reported.

17. (C) The cease-fire has allowed government administration officials and political party leaders to travel freely throughout the District. CDO Woli claimed that, since the cease-fire, all VDC Secretaries and government officials from the Ministry of Agriculture, the Postal Service and others have been able to conduct their business with only slight harassment by the Maoists. Political party leaders averred, however, that VDC Secretaries and other officials do not spend the night in their VDC area due to fear of Maoist reprisals. All political parties in Dhadingbesi claimed they could travel throughout Dhading during the day, but would return to district headquarters at night.

18. (C) CDO Woli indicated that all schools in the district are staffed, although many have only temporary teachers. The CDO requires all teachers to report to district headquarters once every month in order to report on Maoist activity. However, many teachers appear to be sympathetic with the Maoists or are reluctant to provide the local government with information for fear of reprisals, he said.

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Comment  
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19. (C) Reports of ongoing extortion, recruitment and training by the Maoists in Chitwan and Dhading districts align with reports received from other districts in Nepal. Clearly, government administration officials would like to

give the impression that they are able to administer effectively to the people. The reality is probably much less sanguine. Post suspects that in the Maoist affected areas, particularly in Dhading, the insurgents are much more in control -- or more disruptive -- in many areas than local administrators claim. This assessment is consistent with the demonstrated absence of government offices at the local level and the reluctance of villagers and teachers to cooperate with government administrators. However, at least the cease-fire has brought relative stability and peace to residents of Dhading and Chitwan as well as some hope for the future. End Comment.

MALINOWSKI